

## Realist Criminology and its Discontents

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### *Introduction*

As one of the original architects of left realism, Roger Matthews is too well-known for us to have to outline his many achievements and his influence on the discipline. We assume that the readers of this special issue know his work well. Instead of doffing our caps and writing an anodyne and congratulatory review, we want to focus on the claims Matthews makes in this book and what can be drawn from them to drive our discipline forward. This is, after all, how one treats an intellectual with respect: not by withholding critical judgement and genuflecting politely but by taking the broad realist position he represents seriously and, in the act of criticising it, working to keeping it alive and operational.

In order to contextualise Matthews' book we must first say a few words about the condition of contemporary criminology. For us, theoretical criminology has almost ground to a complete standstill. There have been a few interesting contributions to existing positions in recent years but the general trend is quite clear. Criminologists these days seem doomed to repeat ideas from the twentieth century, and there appears to be a pronounced fear of actually hatching new ideas and positions that are products of a thoroughgoing critical interrogation of our present conjuncture. Our withdrawal from theory-building has left the door open for banal empiricism to wander in unopposed and make itself at home. As Matthews (2010) himself has hinted, huge swathes of our discipline are now occupied by fact-finding or story-telling empiricists who appear more interested in career-building, income-generation and supplying various political and cultural interest groups with ideological ammunition than they are in the pursuit of truth.

Criminologists have largely failed to take a lead in explaining and solving the crucial problems we face today. These problems are too numerous to recount in full detail here, but for us the most notable are the imminent threat of ecological catastrophe, the power of global capital constantly to disrupt the ethical and socioeconomic lives of everyday people, the

growth of global criminal markets that operate off the statistical radar, and the growth of the securitisation apparatus. We seem unable to even properly tax the super-rich, let alone ensure economic participation for all or redistribute power and wealth. We have also seen the implosion of state governance in some locales (Mattei and Nader, 2008; Grayson, 2011; Silverstein, 2014; see also Currie, 2013), and the withering away of progressive sociability in a great many more (Winlow and Hall, 2013). Entrapment in this totalising market system is persuading many people at some difficult point in their lives to simply give up on the principles of trusting others and doing honest business (see Winlow, 2014; Antonopoulos and Hall, 2014).

The harms that result from these combined processes are staggering to behold, but critical criminology has not yet managed to bring them into relief because it remains firmly rooted in social constructionism and its interminable relativistic analyses of ethics, language and epistemology. For many critical criminologists the default position continues to involve the dismissal of harm and the of redirection critical attention towards government and the oligarchs who control the mass media. Despite the sheer scale of the 2008 crash and the ongoing harms of ‘austerity’, twenty-first century critical criminology is, for the most part, resolutely idealist, and it cannot be persuaded to look again at the reality of our present way of life. We remain trapped in an epoch defined by the collapse and partial resurgence of abstract finance capitalism, a system which, we all know, redistributes wealth upwards, destroys welfare systems, corrupts democracy and casts growing numbers into debt peonage. The free hand of the market has created utter devastation in the physical and social environments but still processes of ‘labelling’, ‘stigmatisation’ and ‘othering’ preoccupy the criminological left. The leftist tradition of ideology critique is noticeable only by its absence, and there is little obvious desire to develop a new critical focus on global political economy and its deleterious outcomes (Sayer, 2015). We are generalising of course, but it makes no sense to deny critical criminology’s continued idealism and content ourselves with the conceit that we are doing a sterling job of identifying and explaining the social harms that are inevitable outcomes of the financialisation of the global economy, the corruption of our politics and the gradual corrosion of our social worlds.

Matthews’ book seeks to respond to the general inertia of the discipline. In particular he hopes to move beyond the reductive and non-dialectical interplay between critical criminology and administrative criminology. For Matthews, there are productive seams still

to be mined, and if criminology is to progress it needs to move beyond the idealism of the left and the cynical pragmatism of the right by working through the new realist agenda he outlines in the book. The general framework he offers us owes much to the tradition of left realism, but the most important influence on Matthews' thesis is the critical realism of Roy Bhaskar (2008a; 2008b), Margaret Archer (2004) and others. We discuss both of these traditions in the pages that follow. Matthews is one of the first criminologists to utilise this critical realism to any great degree. As a resolutely empirical discipline Anglo-European social science has scorned abstract theoretical models, especially those that seek to identify and grapple with intransitive forces that operate underneath language and interpretation. The refusal to engage with such models is a great shame because Bhaskar had much to teach us about everyday experience and its underlying contexts.

Matthews does not talk in detail about critical realism, and he does not clearly identify which aspects of this quite substantial corpus are vital for the rejuvenation of our discipline. Instead he spends a significant portion of the book identifying the obvious limitations of the ubiquitous liberalism that dominates criminology today. Matthews pulls no punches, and he is brave enough to acknowledge that the anti-statist liberalism and libertarianism that is so common on criminology's left-wing shares a common ideological root with the anti-regulatory neoliberalism that has become totally dominant on the political right. He begins the book with an authoritative account of the development of modern criminology, which is all the more absorbing given that Matthews himself played a significant role in fracturing the criminological left during the nineteen eighties. Alongside a number of colleagues (see especially Matthews and Young, 1986; Lea and Young, 1993), he could no longer tolerate the naïve idealism, crude structuralism and political inefficacy of the radical social constructionism that had come to colonise leftist thought and politics. He proposed to build an innovative leftist account of the crime problem that, without diminishing the disproportionate harms caused by state and corporate crime, acknowledged the reality of the genuine harms that working class and minority criminality could inflict on victims.

What Matthews attempts to do here is reconstruct left realism on a solid new epistemological foundation. In truth the British left realism of the 1980s couldn't quite tear itself away from hard-line social constructionism and diluted cultural Marxism. Jock Young (2009), Matthews' sometime collaborator, remained wedded to moral panic theory, a favourite concept amongst the social constructionists, despite having earlier expressed concern that it

was being overstated. In his later role as a cultural criminologist, Young tended to assume with the others influenced by the cultural Marxism of E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall (see Dworkin, 1997; Winlow et al, 2015) that resistance to power was a timeless fact of life and an inexhaustible source of political energy. Others in the cultural criminology fold are now beginning to express serious doubts about the symbolic efficiency of the concept of organic resistance, but it still holds on to its place as one of the sub-discipline's fundamental domain assumptions.

Critical realism offers a far more solid and dependable intellectual base from which to proceed. Much of Matthews' book is pitched as a critique of contemporary criminology, and he should be warmly congratulated for slaughtering a few of criminology's sacred cows with surgical precision. To simplify his position, he believes that realist criminology must be policy relevant, avoid the idealism of a radical left that lost its way in the 1960s and 1970s, as it was absorbed by the powerful anti-statist liberal and libertarian currents that became dominant at the time, and progress incrementally by producing new theoretical insights and empirical data. We support the overall principle of moving forward, especially the need for criminology's internal production of new theoretical concepts that can help to explain the criminological phenomena that appear in today's world. However, we have a number of problems with the way he wants to initiate this new and crucial progressive movement in criminological thought. First, we have a problem with his conceptualisation of both 'realism' and 'idealism'. Second – and this follows on from the problem of defining realism – we fundamentally disagree with the emphasis Matthews' places upon 'policy relevance'. Third, we are not convinced that empiricism can perform the leading role that he envisages. Fourth, Matthews offers a strange defence of capitalist 'consumerism' in which he fails to make the crucial distinction between consumption and consumer culture (see Hall et al., 2008). This, we will argue, is a fatal error that kills off the possibility of constructing a new realist criminology that can effectively criticise and suggest alternatives to the destructive and criminogenic way of life we lead today.

#### *Left realism - initial problems*

Fraser (2013) argues that feminism had lost much of its radical appeal by the turn of the millennium and was all too easily assimilated by neoliberalism's competitive-individualist

culture. However, feminism's initial impact on criminology was nevertheless a game-changer. By emphasising the crucial point that some crime represents an experience of real harm lived by human beings and is not merely a social construct exaggerated by the media for political purposes, feminist criminologists performed the valuable task of returning leftist criminology's objects of *crime* and *harm* to the foreground and reconnecting them to experiential reality.

The emergence of left realism in Britain in the mid-1980s was a culmination of critical thinking about the inherent flaws of left idealism and other mainstream criminological theories. Currie's (1985) and Young's (1986) early contributions were seminal. However, although left idealism's most prominent flaw was the neglect of the reality of crime as experienced by victims, the emergence of left realism also appears to have been, at least partially, a reaction to the success right-realist criminology had achieved in its lobbying of the US and UK governments from the 1970s. Right realists had always focused on victims, but it was a superficial and populist focus that completely failed to take into account the crimes of the powerful or analyse the complex conditions that underlie trends in crime and harm (Hall and Wilson, 2014). Left realists acknowledged that the crimes of the powerful had not been properly addressed and that some aspects of law and criminal justice were biased against the working class, but they also took the crucial progressive step of admitting that most petty crime was *intra-class*. In other words most of it was committed by working-class people against other working-class people (see Schwartz and DeKeseredy, 1991).

These were the salutary lessons provided by the US and UK victim surveys of the 1980s. Even the partial glimpse of reality provided by orthodox empiricism revealed the flaws of left-idealist critical criminology. Critical criminology's weak theorisation of intra-class crime

and absence of suggestions for policy allowed right realism to dominate. Left realism attempted to correct this problem by constructing a more realistic theory of crime by focusing on the harms victims experience in their locales and analysing them in the 'square of crime' (see for example Lea, 1987, 1992). This new theoretical framework was made up of four interactive relational parts: the victim, the offender, the reaction of the public and the reaction of the state's agencies. If fractious relations between these four major players could be improved, it may be possible to reduce crime without increased securitisation.

In the 1990s left realism appears to have had a small amount influence on the Blair and Clinton governments. However, repairing relations in the square of crime did little to alleviate the underlying economic and cultural conditions which seemed to have probabilistic causal relationships to crime and harm. Left realism challenged the domination of social constructionism on the left and called for positive policy interventions. However, the policies that were suggested simply did not go deep enough to reshape late capitalism's underlying criminogenic conditions. As we all know, eventually the right won the argument with their securitisation and incarceration agendas and the left's influence waned.

Despite this failure, Matthews argues that criminology should build on left realism's positive gains by incorporating critical realism. We agree with this, but the fundamental problem we have is that Matthews gets this project off on the wrong footing by inverting the concepts of the 'real' and the 'ideal'. He posits depth intervention as a form of 'idealism', but he understands this not as philosophical or ethical idealism but impossible utopianism. He then insists that we should restrict ourselves to 'realism', but in reality he understands this 'realism' to be a form of pragmatism, in this case piecemeal policy reforms in the context of liberal-parliamentary capitalism. Matthews' argument therefore rests on two fundamental

category errors made by confusing idealism with utopianism and realism with pragmatism. As we have argued at length (see Winlow and Hall, 2013), to assume that our current mode of living will simply continue on unopposed is not realism and it is not pragmatism. The cold hard facts of the matter are clear: we simply cannot go on as we are. To believe that we can is a form of utopianism, whereas the standard utopian response, which is to argue that we must intervene at a deep level to set history on a new course, is in fact entirely reasonable and anything but ‘utopian’.

This categorical shift allows Matthews to avoid the fundamental political question at the heart of realist criminology: *what depth of political intervention is required* to create the conditions in which harmful crime can be significantly reduced without reliance on securitisation? Matthews has pre-empted this fundamental question, moving us further away from genuine critical realism and closer to the administrative pragmatism. He wants realist criminology to be ‘policy relevant’, but shouldn’t we be brave enough to acknowledge that neoliberal political parties – which, these days, means virtually every political party in the mainstream – have no interest in learning about what works in the reduction of crime and harm? Only policy suggestions that identify a reduction in state spending and the involvement of the market appear have any chance of being picked up by western governments these days, a trend which fosters policy-based research rather than research-based policy and further corrodes the values of both the university and ‘objective’ social scientific research.

We cannot begin to speak about the amelioration of harms without a realistic appraisal of our current situation and the forces and processes that underlie it. Although some left realists still write with critical depth (see for example Lea, 2002), the left realist movement as a whole faltered as it moved forward into the nineties and became something of a compromise

position between critical criminology and administrative criminology. It became progressively bogged down in its administrative role of providing neoliberal governments with pragmatic alternatives to the right realist strategies of securitisation and incarceration, an unwinnable game played out in front of a public who wanted quick results. Even gestures towards long-term projects of transforming underlying structures and processes became potentially discrediting to a left-realism committed to pragmatism; it had made its bed and had to lie on it.

An injection of genuine critical realism could have revived left realism. The principle that deep political intervention was impossible had already been established (see Lea and Young, 1993), and left realism became ensnared by the negative ideology of *capitalist realism* (see Fisher, 2009), the new liberal-postmodernist ideology that has convinced the vast majority that no fundamental alternative to capitalism is feasible. The triumph of capitalist realism has been so complete that even traditional social democratic reforms – such as publicly controlled investment, progressive taxation, nationalised major industries, state-run health and secular education – now appear extreme and remote from the reality in which we live (Winlow and Hall, 2013). Left realism's pragmatism also left it with little choice but to adopt standard legal definitions of crime, which of course ignore broader and deeper harms. Thus it contributed little to the debate on whether the legal categories of 'crime' properly represent the harms inflicted on ordinary people and their environments. Because major structural and systemic problems remained beyond its scope it had little to say about reform beyond criminal justice agencies and local communities. Left realism boxed itself into a corner because it inappropriately redefined realism as the pragmatism that limits itself to what *can* be done within existing structural and systemic restraints. Simultaneously, by confusing true



realism with impossible idealism, it severely narrowed its analytical scope and became unable to address what *must* be done to transform underlying criminogenic conditions.

### *Problems with empiricism*

Matthews' blueprint for a new realism relies on an empirical platform. While it is unfair to portray empiricism as intrinsically useless, on its own, without the guidance of sophisticated theoretical concepts relevant to the times in which we live, it can be intellectually and politically toxic. Without relevant concepts it is too easily deployed in the task of reproducing rather than transforming current conditions. Hypothetically, the task of empirically testing broad, deep and sophisticated theories is not impossible, but in practical terms it is too expensive and impractical, or it is politically unpalatable. Whereas extreme social constructionism promotes political inertia by obscuring reality and transforming the vital task of conceptualisation into an endless language game, post-structuralism insists that meaning is always contingent and reality can never really be represented, except perhaps for the shortest time in the most localised space. Matthews is right to reject this obfuscation, but the expensive and unwieldy empirical method is not necessarily the most reliable way forward.

All empirical projects are subject to prior political agendas. 'Value-free' empirical science is a myth, and criminology's research agenda is inextricably tied to existing political positions, the domain assumptions of which insist that we accept their various beliefs about human nature, morality, freedom, authority, harm and the role of the state in our lives (Hall and Winlow, 2015). What should be more interesting to social scientists, however, are the repressed experiences and views of Baudrillard's (2007) 'silent majority', those who have little or no representation or influence upon current political agendas. The experiences of the 'silent majority' are filtered through dominant ideologies and either denied clear symbolic

expression by constructionists or always fragmented and misrepresented by empiricists. Empiricism is an ideological mercenary that can serve any political purpose, and thus, on its own, without a thorough and sophisticated re-conceptualisation of the experiences and underlying contexts of everyday life, cannot provide the platform for a new criminological realism.

In the absence of the will to re-conceptualise everyday experiential life and its contexts through the lenses of both minorities and the silent majority, the open debate on precisely how deep reforms must go, and which reforms are likely to have any significant and durable impact on criminality, harm and securitisation, which should be the epicentre of social science, is impossible. This is the task of theoretical criminology, but it is now perfectly clear that theory has been marginalised in the discipline. To begin the task of reconceptualization theoretical criminology must first recognize our current representations and models of the social world – with its phenomena, events, values, norms and power relations – as effects rather than causes. Causes operate in far deeper and very complex processes organised by the *fundamental fantasy* that drives the subjective agent and the *fundamental logic* that drives and organises the interactions between the psyche, culture and the socioeconomic system.

Matthews also has difficulty in recognizing the unavoidable fact that by far the most influential context for the configuration and reproduction of the fundamental fantasy, and by extension late-capitalist subjectivity, is consumer culture (Hall et al., 2008; Smart, 2010; Moxon, 2011; Miles, 2014). He refuses to accept the incorporation of the silent majority into the subjectivising symbolic circuits of consumer culture and the permanent distraction of potential political energy. In contemporary consumer culture the majority seek their status and construct their identities, yet this is consistently denied by those on the left who hang

onto obsolete conceptions of 'autonomous' subjectivity. Matthews (2014) goes one step further by claiming that 'consumerism' is one of capitalism's great benefits, the saving grace of an otherwise oppressive socioeconomic system. According to Matthews, when capitalism is one day transformed by accumulated pragmatic reforms, consumerism should take its place as a fundamental right, a great gift to the people.

This is populist rhetoric born a fundamental misunderstanding of what consumer culture is and what it has done to human relations and processes of identity formation (see Hayward, 2012). As such it is the weakest aspect of Matthews' overall argument. Matthews confuses consumption with consumerism, and he then continues on down this intellectual dead-end to make a series of quite significant mistakes that detract from the more edifying aspects of the book. Matthews sees only good things in consumerism. He can see no problem in the way consumer culture stimulates myriad false needs, its tendency to make individuals feel inadequate or incomplete, and its role in mediating social relationships and driving new exclusions and forms of discrimination (see, for example, Hayward and Yar, 2006). He has no issue with the vacuity of commodified forms of culture that exist solely to sell, or with consumer symbolism's role in the depoliticisation of the working class and the displacement and erosion of the collective identity-building once sourced in class, community, locality, family and history. The inability to distinguish between consumption and consumerism also hampers our understanding of important changes within our global economic system, most notably western de-industrialisation and the growth of new eastern industrial economies built upon production for export to a west now populated by debt-laden consumers. His idealistic pragmatism and faith in the benefits of consumerism must come as cold comfort for those workers forced to toil in appalling conditions in sweatshops across the east. The appearance of a global precariat in mega-slums serviced by failed states (Davis, 2007), the degradation of

our eco-system and the depletion of our natural resources (Klare, 2008, 2012; Heinberg, 2011), impending resource wars and enforced population movements (Klare, 2002), burgeoning criminal markets in cyber-space (Treadwell, 2012) and the other problems that await future generations simply do not appear on the radar of the sort of ‘realist’ project Matthews advocates.

### *Why we need ultra-realism*

At the moment, liberal-left sociology and criminology are limited to the study of *effects* or *symptoms* as either constructions or mid-range causes rather than indicators of what might lie beneath them. Matthews is right that the only way to get down to causes is a potentially potent realist project. However, even the brief critiques presented here suggest that the pragmatism and empiricism he advocates – especially in a context shorn of the most important cultural current in late modernity – are not nearly strong enough as a platform on which such a project can be built.

For us, if such a platform is to be built it is first necessary to restart the theoretical machinery that was shut down by both mainstream and critical criminology in the post-war period. We would contend that Matthews’ ambition of a new critical realist criminology can come to fruition only in a framework of what we call *ultra-realism* (see Hall and Winlow, 2015). Empiricist criminology is trapped in the superficial realm of phenomena and, along with interpretivists and post-structuralists, its advocates tend to discourage theorisation of depth structures and generative processes. One further problem is that it cannot provide us with a sense of *absence*, which, as we shall see shortly, is also causative at the deep level.

Of course, anyone who advocates a return to realism has to contend with the problem that realism in general has a rather bad name. One reason behind this is the dominance of varieties of cynical realism in popular culture, politics, philosophy and social sciences. These positions transhistoricize and essentialize the very worst of human propensities and tacitly support the politics of conservatism and classical liberalism. Their cynicism and essentialism is such that they make socioeconomic transformation look either unwise or impossible. Conservatism's rigid, pessimistic Old Testament view of the human being as an intrinsically wicked sinner is often given pseudo-scientific credibility by the ethological conception of the human as a 'killer ape' (Dart, 1953). The timeless sinner is in need of constant discipline and punishment by traditional institutions bolstered by the rational-technological forces of modernity. Most conservative control theories are grounded in this myth, and neoclassical right realism differs only in its myth of the wicked human being as a rational calculating individual that power can force into adopting modes of self-government.

Liberal-postmodernism has its own version of cynical realism. In art, cinema, literature, music and many forms of youth culture on the 'street' we can detect the powerful current of *depressive realism*. Well-known examples include the works of French novelist Michel Houellebecq and American novelist Brett Easton-Ellis (Jeffery, 2011). Redolent of *capitalist realism*, which systematically persuades young people that no change is possible in their lifetime, *depressive realism* supplies us with a narrative of late-modern degeneration – selfishness, nihilism and the futility and exhaustion of life at the dystopian end of history. It's rather sobering that all the left can place in opposition to this edifice of conservative and postmodernist cynicism is the rather ailing *left idealism* of the 60s-vintage 'new left'. Left idealism was Young's (1975) term for this influential movement, but it is a misnomer. Underneath the idealism represented in symbolic interplay lies a disavowed *naturalistic*

*realism*, the naïve assumption that the human being is always orientated to creativity, transgression and the struggle for social justice, the mirror image of conservatism's wickedness, the opposing view that can be allowed into liberalism's intellectual clearing house for the sake of balance and the perpetuation of eternal hope amidst permanent political inaction. Both positions are unable to deal with the sheer diversity of human drives, desires and actions.

*Critical realism*, as Matthews points out, presents criminology with a genuinely alternative theoretical framework. Most critical realists claim that some measured empirical observation is useful, as is the acknowledgement of human meaning and the causal power of agency, but they stress that there is far more to social life and its dynamic relations and forces. Roy Bhaskar (1997), critical realism's main architect, argued that positivism-empiricism can reveal the regular recurrence of events but not the underlying structures, powers, forces and processes that influence the way events occur. These deep dynamics are never fully revealed or represented by empirically observable events. This is especially true in the criminological field, where the systematic concealment and incompleteness of events is the norm. Empirical research projects are always preceded by the initial construction of concepts and hypotheses that to a large extent predetermine what researchers will find. Perhaps homicide statistics have a modicum of validity and reliability (Hall and McLean, 2009), but it is difficult to make this claim about anything else in criminology. Empiricism might be useful in conceptualising what we mean by 'crime' and 'harm', but it cannot help us to reveal the drives, processes and structures, and indeed their very real consequences, that exist independently of empirical knowledge and the current theoretical frameworks that are in thrall to 'empirical testing'. In fact we might suspect that our devotion to empiricism *and* our alternative devotion to constructionism can be seen as different but complementary ways of

deliberately avoiding any contact with underlying drives, processes and structures (see Hall and Winlow, 2015).

However, critical realism is not a deterministic doctrine. Most critical realists insist that we retain the ontological distinctiveness of the individual and the social while we apply our efforts to the analysis of their relatedness. The standard proposition is ontological realism in the *intransitive* realm of independent structures, processes and powers combined with a qualified epistemological relativism in the *transitive* realm of things that are the products of our knowledge and activity. We must accept that real power places constraints on our knowledge and activities because the ‘thing-like’ quality of structures, processes and forces in the intransitive realm. There are no universal laws, but under certain structural and processual conditions there are *probabilistic tendencies*. For instance, the disruption of settled socioeconomic communities by neoliberal restructuring will tend to increase crime, harm and social unrest. Such consequences are to a large extent predictable and supported by historical analysis. The process is of course mediated by human beings and their ability to construct meaning and act as moral agents in the world, but to suggest that action is free from either ideological or forceful restraint is naïve.

Nevertheless, critical realism focuses on the relationship between agency, structure and causation in a changing world. Agency can reproduce structures and processes but also has the potential to transform them. However, as we act within them, they feed back and influence what we do. Structure is more than an ideational ‘concept’, therefore we must move beyond social constructionism and postmodernism. Most contemporary constructionist positions, such as Giddens’s (1984) structuration theory, are balanced between agency and structure, but truncate and compress both into the mid-range ‘actual’ level whilst putting too

much faith in the powers of individual agents to act with collective efficacy. Thus we consistently overestimate the influence our ethics, meanings and limited voluntary actions can exert on deep structural forces, processes and structures.

Neoliberalism's market logic restricts us as long as we remain enmeshed in it and our livelihoods remain dependent upon it. We can invent a humanised form of neoliberalism in our heads and dream of alternatives, but we cannot reduce its forces, processes and structures to norms, rules, conventions, speech-acts and language. Firmly established institutions have the power to influence things in the material world: think, for instance, of the probabilistic relationships between neoliberal politics, globalisation, risky investment banking, austerity, burgeoning criminal markets, social unrest and repressive securitisation. Critical realism can help criminology to home in on the fundamental forces, processes and structures that lie underneath criminological phenomena. However, if it were to be integrated into criminological theory and applied to its full potential, it's doubtful that its analyses would support the sort of mid-range policy initiatives that Matthews calls for. It would be far more likely to tell us that things run far deeper and require correspondingly deeper political intervention.

Critical realism is also useful in that it sees *absence* as causative. For instance, in the absence of a functioning welfare system and/or the politics of solidarity amongst working people, there is a high probability that criminal markets would expand and harmful crime would increase. Human agents can of course change their social worlds for the better, as long as they are actually acting on real underlying forces, processes and structures rather than simply gesturing towards them. Whereas positivist-empiricism can detect only the symptoms, social constructionists and postmodernists dissolve the reality of these forces in language and



discourse, while orthodox structural Marxists dissolve subjectivity in outdated notions of ideology as the obfuscation of truth or the hegemonic ‘manufacture of consent’.

Critical realists assume that human agents are relatively autonomous but insist that they must understand ontology before they understand epistemology. Idealist positions such as interpretivism, social constructionism, discourse theory and post-structuralism are premature and deal with only one dimension of human existence. We can talk, but with little knowledge of the forces that act beneath everyday life we have little of substance to talk about. By ignoring deep forces, social science restricts itself to *symptomology* rather than *aetiology* (Hall, 2012a). For Bhaskar (2008a), three ontological dimensions of social reality are amenable to epistemology, agency and political intervention:

1. The empirical dimension (phenomenological experiences of knowing subjects)
2. The actual dimension (real events and subjective experiences)
3. The real dimension (underlying generative mechanisms that cause the events that are open to experience)

This depth realism opens up an intransitive dimension beneath empiricism, subjective knowledge and ethical imperatives. Increasing our knowledge of deep structures allows us to make better judgements about the validity of competing knowledge-claims and proposed political interventions. To act effectively we need to have some idea of what lies beneath our social conversations, social relations and subjective interests, no matter how complex, shifting and daunting it might be. Critical realism’s objective is to dig beneath empirical realism (positivism and empiricism), transcendental idealism (hermeneutics, interpretivism, constructionism) and social-relational dynamics (conflict theory, Marxism, feminism) to

ground knowledge in deep structures, processes and generative mechanisms. It is not, as Matthews suggests, simply to suggest pragmatic policy suggestions.

Critical realism is not deterministic. It acknowledges that causes must involve social actions performed by human agents, but it is also aware that most social actions are unconscious, routine or enforced. Therefore causality cannot be understood solely by the analysis of actors' conscious meanings as they express them in a language limited by ideology. Thus we need to develop deeper and more sophisticated conceptualisations of the contexts in which human meanings and actions are generated, systematised and reproduced. To do this Bhaskar steps into line with Giddens (1984) by relying on a dualistic model of structure and agency in which the two categories are ontologically different. However, in his dialectical turn Bhaskar (2008b) moves beyond Giddens's naïve notion of 'iterative practices' by arguing that only when agentic action is informed by deep knowledge of structures and generative processes can it have any real transformative potential. Bhaskar uses the concept of an interdependent totality to explain why human agents who seek to transform the social world must be practical at the same time as being aware of their connectedness with others in a single system of totalising relations. He agrees with Marx that an agent's actions can become real, ethical and political only when they are orientated to the practical activities that configure the total system. As we have seen, Matthews's uncritical acceptance of 'consumerism' does not show this awareness of the totality of socioeconomic relations in a global economy, or the parts the consumer economy and consumer culture play in the underlying generative mechanisms important to the criminological field of enquiry.

As we have seen, critical realists acknowledge the fact that absence can be transformative; it can truly change the nature of a thing. The human agent can trigger such transformative

absence by simply refusing to participate in the totalising system of interdependent practices, which is the principle behind forms of non-violent resistance, such as strikes etc. (Žižek, 2008). Our lives could be positively transformed by *removing*, say, stockpiles of weapons, corrupt politicians, large corporations or the private right to create debt-generated capital... or even the sociosymbolic status attached to luxury consumer items and the desire to own them. On the other hand, harmful transformations could be brought about by *removing* social recognition and nurturing, democratic politics, human rights, intellectual life and education, livelihoods, stable communities, welfare support and so on. However, not all of this negative causation takes place in the mid-range of governmental policy that Mathews relies on; much of it runs far deeper.

Despite all of this, we should not imagine that critical realism as it stands is a panacea for criminology. There are numerous flaws, and one of the most important is Bhaskar's simplified view of the 'negative', which does not take into account Hegel's well-known double negative, the *negation of the negation*. Both Adorno (1990) and Žižek (1993) have argued that this important concept provides us with one of the main reasons why transformative absences tend *not* to be put into practice. The capitalist system, with its totality of interdependent relations and unavoidable systemic imperatives, imposes on its populations – or at least those with something to lose – the *compulsory refusal to refuse*. Instead, when situations demand it, we just do things – including crime and harm – because nobody seems willing or able to make the sacrifices necessary to make the first moves towards an alternative. The system is geared up to make the political act of negation virtually impossible because refusal to participate in some way would be disastrous for individuals who have no independent means of support.

The impossibility of using refusal and negation to invoke causal absence works on two levels. First, it is impractical because capitalism's system of interdependencies is set up to make us all an offer we can't refuse, at least if we hope to ensure our basic material and social survival. Second, consumer culture is set up to create a fantasised sense of absence and convert it into desire for consumer objects that carry vital sociosymbolic significance for individuals whose traditional sources of identity are receding into history (Hall et al, 2008; Winlow and Hall, 2013). The permanent postponement of the power of negation is vital to the system's reproduction. Speculative realists argue that in the current Anthropocene age many of the deleterious effects that impact on the world are caused by us rather than nature. Therefore, we hold the power to negate these disasters and become the architects of our own fate (Žižek, 2010). For instance, criminal markets would not burgeon so rapidly in the developing world with stronger democratic states and control of resources, which are both denied by neoliberal financial power, but to refuse the demands of neoliberal economic restructuring, as the Greek case appears set to demonstrate, is almost impossible.

Many of the changes in the trends of crime, harm and securitisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are effects of Anthropocene disasters – global warming and enforced population migration, resource wars, environmental pollution, financial crashes, rapid industrialisation and chaotic urbanisation, rapid deindustrialisation and urban decay, unemployment, the technological destruction of livelihoods, the marketization of culture and so on. Speculative realists argue that we must look upon these disasters and their consequences without optimism, as contingent realities in a cold world, but we must also reflect seriously on our role in their causation and speculate freely on how things could be different should we choose to change our way of doing things. Unfortunately this is not the sort of depth speculation that Matthews' pragmatic realism would advocate, and demonstrates that the deeper and more

realistic realism goes the more likely it is to be misconceived by pragmatists as impossible idealism or utopianism.

However, speculative realism shares a fundamental problem with the other forms of realism we have discussed so far; their separation of agency from structure means they have little to say about subjectivity's active and willing role in disasters and their consequences. They cannot explain why subjects seem unable to learn from their mistakes, and why they are willing to risk the infliction of harm on others and their environments in order to reproduce the current socioeconomic system and further their interests within it. In the act of separating out and absolving human beings, critical realism's dualism of agency and structure to some extent still reifies abstract forces and exonerates the individual. Žižek (*passim*) provides us with a more illuminating view of the subject's relation to the capitalist socioeconomic system. He reminds us rather harshly that we are already aware of the intransitive realm and know enough about it to act politically, and we consistently encounter realistic speculation about the problems we cause and alternative ways of doing things. But we repress this true knowledge and sink back into a culture of comfortable acceptance. We systematically avoid Hegel's politically effective universal truth, the *concrete universal*, which could provide our speculative knowledge real substance (Žižek, 2000). The concrete universal truth is known to some extent by most of us. It is felt experientially on an everyday basis. Myriad concrete universal representations of the totality exist 'down there' amongst those who regularly experience the deleterious consequences of the system's disasters (see Hall, 2012b). 'Up there', the corridors of power in business and post-political administration are shot through with knowledge of abstract processes *and* their related concrete universals. For instance, in J.Q. Wilson's *Thinking About Crime* (1975) he revealed that at the time the US government knew perfectly well that the impending restructuring of the economy in the abrupt move to

neoliberalism would cause social unrest, increased crime rates and the popular perception of the need for increased securitisation.

Harmful crime, violence, intimidation, victimhood, cynicism, nihilism and the destruction of communities are some of the substantive criminological elements of the *abject concrete universal* that is vital to a renewed realist criminological research project. We must concern ourselves with the individuals who suffer most in the wake of capitalism's disasters, the victims of its corporate and political crimes but also of the crimes of the cynical predatory individuals who live amongst them and take advantage of their subjugation and vulnerability. To bring the concrete universal into sharper relief, we suggest a move to an *ultra-realist criminology* that uses unsentimental ethnographies contextualised by advanced theoretical frameworks founded upon conceptions of subjectivity and ideology provided by new continental philosophy (see Hall and Winlow, 2015). Ultra-realist criminology would move beyond left realism's inherent pragmatism and critical realism's flawed conception of subjectivity. As a first step towards the construction of a philosophical basis for ultra-realist criminology, we have to accept that Bhaskar's naturalistic metaphor for subjectivity does not work. There is no natural human essence of love and creativity, but, as Adorno (2000) reminded us, it can be cultivated in a nurturing society. For Lacan and Žižek, the 'essence' of human subjectivity is, paradoxically, a non-essential void of conflicting drives, not a natural and inexhaustible Bergsonian 'élan vital' (see Hall, 2012b). Our potential to be loving and creative is always offset by an equal potential to be hateful, prejudiced, apathetic or nihilistic. The material core of the human being is anxious, contingent, flexible, unpredictable and susceptible to obscene enjoyment.

Roberts and Joseph (2005) argue that Bhaskar's real dimension is *fully human*, not independent of the subject. For Žižek, what connects the subject to the real is an *ideological fantasy* comprised of sublime consumer objects, which again indicates just how much Matthews' dismissal of advanced capitalism's prominent cultural form hampers the move to realist criminological investigation. These objects are variations of the master signifier of the *commodity*, which constitutes the dynamic relation between subjectivity and capitalism's system of relentless commodification and competitive individualism. Where Matthews' mistake is to ignore consumer culture and subjectivity entirely, critical realism's mistake is to separate out subjectivity as the *naturally* ethical and creative agent. Žižek's (2008) useful insight is that the social and economic processes in the intransitive realm that seem to act independently of our knowledge and activity are at the very deepest level a product of historically accumulated actions that are routinely *made unconscious*. We really know about what we have done, what we are doing and – as J.Q. Wilson's example above shows – what we are about to do. In other words, we know a lot about the intransitive realm and we have done for some time. Each day we consciously act to reproduce it, but we fetishistically deny our collusion in our own actions and repress it into our unconscious. Therefore the unconscious, the deep psychic realm of repressed symbols, is not created by external repressive forces imposed on us from above. We create it ourselves by constantly *choosing to repress* specific aspects of what we know, which allows us to continue to act in ways that reproduce the system; we persistently *choose* our own unconscious into being. Constantly deconstructing 'meaning' is of little use when each day we choose to fetishistically disavow and render unconscious the crucial elements of what we already know.

The constant act of fetishistic disavowal that characterises the agent's inability to act and its tendency to either passively accept or actively conform to the aggressive and competitive

practices that reproduce the system and inflict harm on others has huge implications for criminological research and theory. Unforgiving interpersonal competition, inequality, separatism, racism, sexism, fraud, corruption, violence, securitisation and punitiveness are merely some of the crude visible symptoms that lie on the surface of the complex of underlying forces activated by the system's constant provocation of the subject's anxiety and obscene enjoyment. Matthews is unerringly right that we need to move beyond both critical criminology and administrative criminology. However, his truncated mid-range form of realism-as-pragmatism cannot escape the problems inherent in empiricism, liberal assumptions of subjectivity and consumer culture's capture of human energy and desire, which endlessly distracts individuals and postpones vital political interventions. For criminology to begin its investigation of the forces and processes that underlie life in advanced capitalism requires a move beyond both left realism and critical realism to ultra-realism.

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